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Intelligence Information Cable

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DIST 26 NOVEMBER 1977

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COUNTRY:

DOI : 19-25 NOVEMBER 1977

SUBJECT: A. POPULARITY IN DAMASCUS OF SADAT'S
INITIATIVE TO THE ISRAELIS
B. POPULAR SYRIAN BELIEF THAT ASAD
NEAR FUTURE WILL PROBABLY MODIFY
HIS OPPOSITION TO SADAT'S INITIATIVE

ACQ :

SOURCE :

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(classification)

1. PUBLIC OPINION IN DAMASCUS GREATLY HAS FAVORED THE VISIT BY PRESIDENT S A D A T OF EGYPT TO JERUSALEM AND SADAT'S EFFORTS TO END THE ARAB/ISRAELI DISPUTE. SYRIANS OF ALL WALKS OF LIFE - LAWYERS, SHOPKEEPERS, FARMERS, PROFESSIONAL MEN AND EVEN A SEGMENT OF THE SYRIAN MILITARY (THE SUNNIS) BELIEVE THAT SADAT HAS MADE AN IMPORTANT BREAKTHROUGH TOWARDS PEACE AND THAT HE SHOULD NOW BE SUPPORTED IN HIS INITIATIVES BY OTHER ARAB STATES, INCLUDING SYRIA AND BY OTHER ARAB LEADERS, PARTICULARLY PRESIDENT HAFIZ AL-A S A D OF SYRIA. THE DAY SADAT MADE HIS SPEECH BEFORE THE KNESSET IN JERUSALEM VIRTUALLY EVERY DAMASCENE WAS GLUED TO HIS RADIO AND MANY OPENLY COMMENTED AFTERWARDS ON THE SENSE THE SPEECH HAD MADE AND THAT THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT WAS WRONG IN NOT BACKING SADAT IN THIS DARING INITIATIVE.

2. OF THOSE IN DAMASCUS WHO HAVE CONDEMNED SADAT'S VISIT, THE MOST IMPORTANT GROUP IS THE RULING BATH PARTY, FOLLOWED BY THE NASIRISTS AND COMMUNISTS.

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MEMBERS OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD STRONGLY HAVE SUPPORTED SADAT ON THIS ISSUE. EVEN SOME SYRIAN BA'ATHIS PRIVATELY HAVE ADMITTED THAT PRESIDENT ASAD WAS BADLY OUTMANEUVERED BY SADAT ON THIS ISSUE AND THAT SYRIA ESSENTIALLY IS NOW ISOLATED IN THE ARAB WORLD -- NOT A PART OF THE REJECTION FRONT OF IRAQ, ALGERIA, LIBYA AND SOUTH YEMEN AND NOT A PART OF THE MODERATE ARAB WORLD WHICH MORE AND MORE IS FAVORING THE CONCEPT OF PEACE WITH ISRAEL AS EXPRESSED BY SADAT. ONLY THE PALESTINE LIBERATION ORGANIZATION (PLO) STILL CAN BE SAID TO SIDE WITH SYRIA ON THIS ISSUE, BUT MANY SYRIANS BELIEVE THIS ORGANIZATION CANNOT BE TRUSTED GIVEN ITS PAST HISTORY OF PLAYING THE ARAB MODERATES OFF AGAINST THE RADICALS AND VICE-VERSA. BA'ATHIS AND OTHERS AS WELL, SAY THERE NOW IS A POSSIBILITY THAT ASAD, UNDER PRESSURES FROM HIS FELLOW BA'ATHIS AND ALAWITES, MIGHT DO SOMETHING "STUPID" LIKE INVITING THE PALESTINIANS INTO SYRIA FROM LEBANON. THIS, HOWEVER, WOULD ONLY PLAY INTO ISRAEL'S HANDS BY GIVING IT THE PRETEXT TO INVADE SYRIA TO DUST ASAD AND HIS REGIME ONCE AND FOR ALL.

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3. ASAD'S PERSONAL POPULARITY IN DAMASCUS HAS PLUMMETED FOLLOWING SADAT'S VISIT TO ISRAEL AND THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT'S CONTRIVED POPULAR DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST HIM IN DAMASCUS. MOST OF THE YOUNG DEMONSTRATORS WHO MARCHED FOR A TIME IN THE STREETS OF DAMASCUS IN PROTEST OF SADAT'S VISIT WERE YOUNG BA'THI TOUGHS, PALESTINIANS, AND MEMBERS OF THE SPECIAL MILITARY BRIGADES CONTROLLED BY THE PRESIDENT'S BROTHER, RIFAT AL A S A D. THESE LATTER SOLDIERS WERE ORDERED TO DEMONSTRATE IN CIVILIAN CLOTHING AND TO SHOUT ANTI-SADAT SLOGANS, THE DEMONSTRATIONS, HOWEVER, WERE UNCONVINCING AND REFLECTED NO REAL ZEAL ON THE PART OF THE PARTICIPANTS.

4. POPULAR, EDUCATED, SYRIAN PUBLIC OPINION NOW INDICATES THAT ASAD HAS THE CHOICE OF BEING FURTHER ISOLATED IN SYRIA AND THE ARAB WORLD BY CONTINUING TO DENOUNCE SADAT OR THAT HE CAN SHOW HIS PRAGMATISM AND GRADUALLY REDUCE SYRIAN CRITICISM OF THE VISIT, THUS MENDING HIS BRIDGES TO SADAT AND THE ARAB MODERATES. MOST FAVOR THAT ASAD WILL CHOOSE THE LATTER APPROACH AND

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THAT THE NEXT MONTHS WILL SEE ASAD'S POPULARITY AGAIN
BEGIN TO RISE IN THE COUNTRY AS HE MODERATES HIS
STAND TOWARD SADAT AND ISRAEL AND ATTEMPTS TO SHOW THE SYRIAN
PEOPLE THAT SADAT IS NOT THE ONLY ARAB LEADER WHO
CAN BE SERIOUS ABOUT TRYING TO BRING PEACE TO THE
MIDDLE EAST.

5. [] DISSEM: []

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